

# HOW EDUCATION CAN IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: THE CASE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

## BACKGROUND

Students with learning difficulties may show poor academic performances, despite their average intelligence

(Lyon *et alii* 2003, Klassen *et alii* 2005, Penney 2018)

Negative education experiences may cause damage to wellbeing and students with learning difficulties are more likely to experience anxiety, stress and school refusal than their peers (Alesi *et alii*. 2014, Pearce 2017, Huang *et al.* 2020)

The problems Italian students may encounter when learning their native language tend to become more serious when learning English, an opaque language with a less direct spelling-sound correspondence than Italian (Fazio *et alii* 2021)

The importance of learning English is clear, as it is used as a lingua franca around the world and its command can improve students' future opportunities, both in their personal and professional life. Teachers and educators play a key role as they have the responsibility to build a learning environment as inclusive as possible and guarantee the right to education

## OBJECTIVES

Exploring students' learning attitudes during English classes, with a focus on students with learning difficulties

Reflecting on learning English compared to other subjects and level of motivation to study

Collecting data about support tools for learners especially for students with learning difficulties

## METHODOLOGY

### TARGET

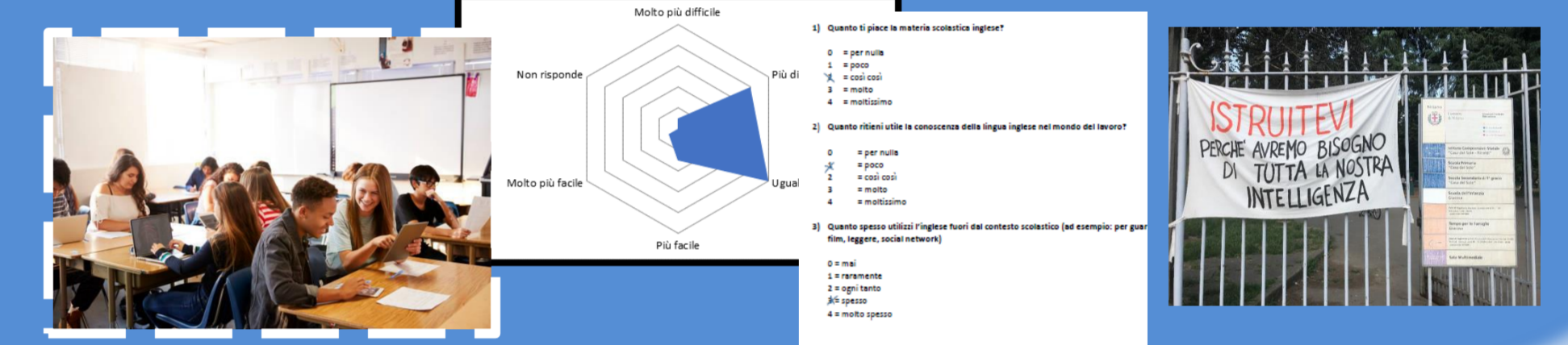
- 2 primary school classes, 2 lower secondary school classes, 10 high school classes - 350 students from 8 to 19 from Milan, Italy
- Students without learning difficulties and students with learning difficulties

### QUESTIONNAIRES

Areas of investigation: linguistic competence, study method, emotions involved in learning, support tools for learners with and without learning difficulties

### CLASS OBSERVATION

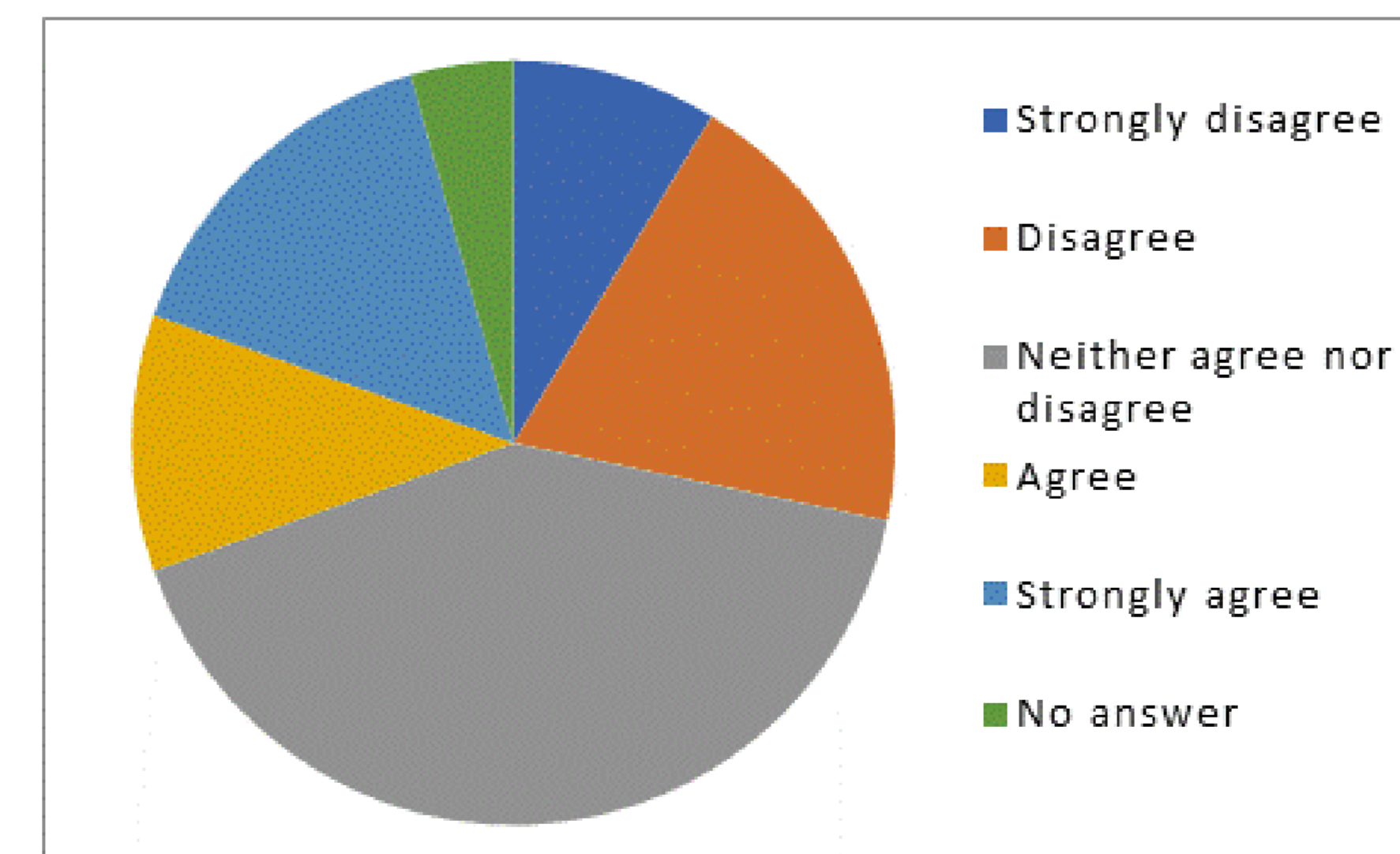
Emotions in classroom: motivation, anxiety and difficulties encountered in learning paths and tools which motivate and support learning



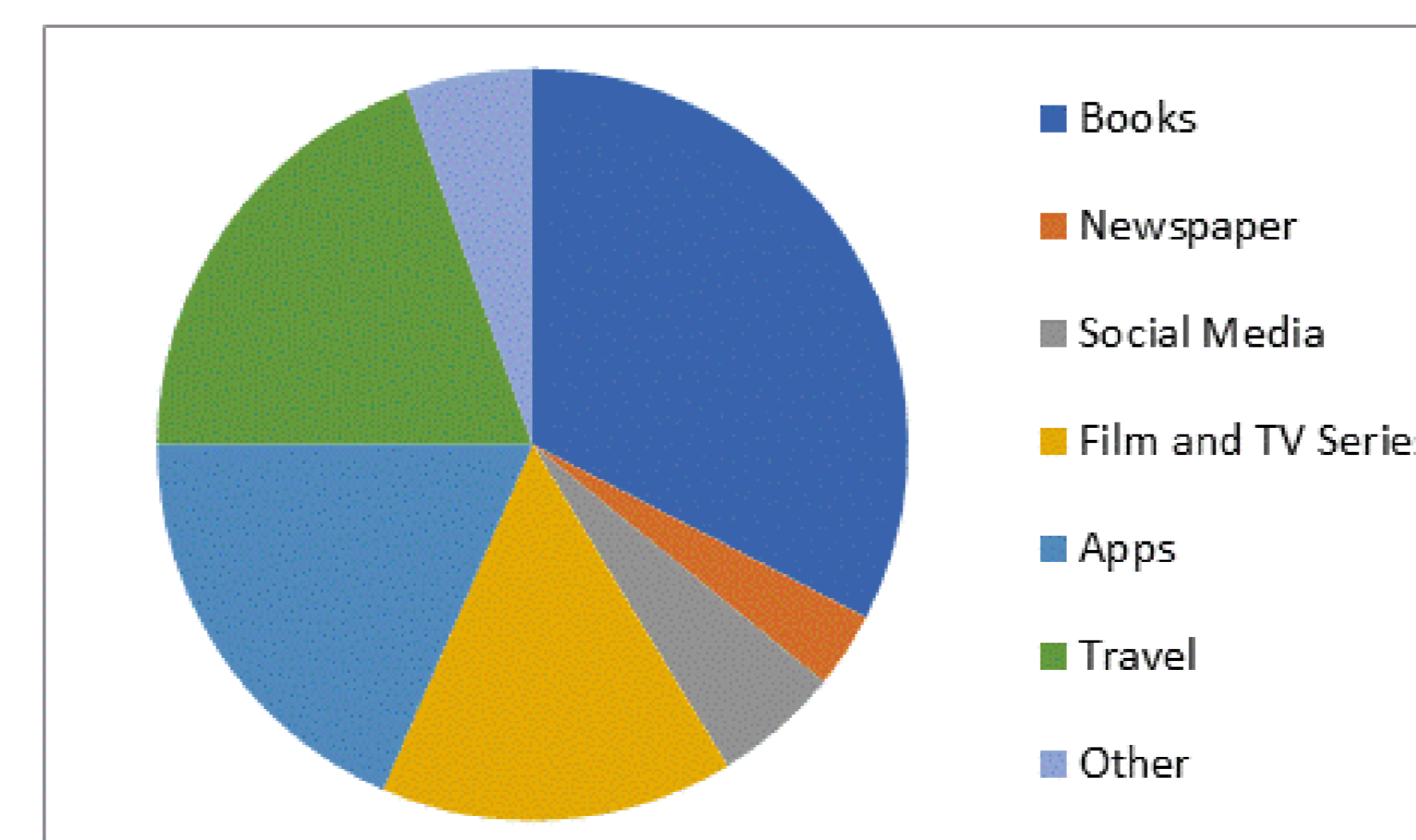
## RESULTS (FOCUS ON PRIMARY SCHOOL)

- The majority of students enjoy learning English. During class observation, they reports that learning English is fundamental in a global world. Most of them can infer the meaning of “Lingua Franca”
- The majority of students report moderate concern before a test. All students with learning difficulties report concern before a test
- The majority of students show reasonable and controlled concern about English tests. Questionnaires and class observation data show that concern is higher in students with learning difficulties
- The majority of students don't consider English harder than other subjects, but students with learning difficulties report more difficulties experienced during English class than other classes
- Unexpectedly, few students are found to use social media to learn English, even though the majority uses apps and videogames on a daily basis, and is willing to learn English to be able, for example, to watch TV series, YouTube channels and travel around the world. Class observation data show that Primary School Italian students are not particularly interested in social media (e.g. Instagram or TikTok), but they love YouTube channels, especially gaming YouTube channel.
- In questionnaires, all students (with or without learning difficulties) have mentioned two or more tools (e.g. concept maps, educational apps, English games online, etc) that support and motivate them in learning English

### ANXIETY



### MOTIVATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH



## KEYPOINTS

- ❖ Students with learning difficulties report more anxiety, despite average performance in English tests. Therefore, interventions should target the emotional barriers/challenges faced by students and focus on improving students' experience in the classroom. Moreover, improving self-esteem may reduce anxiety before testing
- ❖ Questionnaires and in particularly data collected during class observation show that motivation and self-esteem are critical components of learning. Learning strategies based on students' motivations for learning English are thus more likely to succeed
- ❖ A student-centred approach should be based on both traditional and innovative tools and activities that enhance motivation

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